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Big Brother Wins Another

The federal government has apparently won its battle with the academic community to place stringent restrictions on the use of university-based supercomputers by scholars from Soviet-bloc countries. This action, undertaken in the name of national security, is an unnecessary, ineffective and improper restriction on the openness of universities, one of the strengths of American scholarship. Once again the Reagan administration is seeking to turn universities into policemen, forcing them to limit what foreign nationals may do on campus as part of its overall effort to restrict "technology leakage" to the Soviet Union.

At issue are the five national supercomputer centers being set up under a $200 million grant from the National Science Foundation at the University of California, San Diego; the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign; Cornell University; Carnegie-Mellon University, and at a site near Princeton, N.J. The aim of the program is to make the speed and power of multimillion-dollar supercomputers available to academic researchers.

But defense and intelligence agencies in Washington say that Soviet-bloc scientists must be kept from the machines because of their utility in weapons design and cryptography and because the Russians may pilfer the supercomputer technology itself.

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Does the Defense Dept. really think that Russian scholars (even spies pretending to be scholars) would be able to use one of the supercomputers on the sly to design nuclear weapons? Time on those machines will be hard to come by and closely watched. Each of the computer centers is run, in the academic way, by a committee that relies heavily on peer review. When does the government think the secret work will be going on?

Besides, the Russians have access to these and similar machines in other places, some of them outside the United States. Some of the machines are privately owned, and their owners are free to sell time on them to anyone.

If the government is convinced that the presence of a particular Russian scholar in this country presents a national-security threat, it should not grant him a visa. Don't let him into the country and then make the universities keep him out.

A few years ago, the administration tried to prevent foreign nationals from attending lectures that were unclassified but nonetheless had military application. The universities protested, saying such rules conflicted with the ideals of free academic inquiry. Ultimately, the administration backed down.

The universities should protest loudly again. They should not agree to the government's rules.